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REALISM AND THE SEVEN ARTS

BY RALPH BLOCK

EVERY generation is supposed to make its own definition of art. But the nineteenth century seems destined to have made one for to-day. Unarmed by the scalpel of the later psychologist, and lacking the wide survey of the "subconscious" which the psychologist's search-light has gained for him, the amateur æsthetician of the Victorian Age was still able to set down premises that have remained the firmest support for artists who have gone out daringly into the dim uncharted regions of the "new art." Long before painters had tried to make music out of color, while the Impressionists were still a shock to France and Whistler's "symphonies" had not yet assuaged the hurt in Mr. Ruskin's heart, while the Yellow Book was the newest thing in London, Myers was saying in the essay on Virgil, that "it is possible so to arrange forms, colors and sounds as to stimulate the imagination in a new and inexplicable way," and Pater, writing on "The School of Giorgione," was calling for "a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that the definite meaning almost expires."

Both of these scholars were writing about art of the past, and thinking about the art of the future. Pater went so far as to call music the "archtype of all the arts," because in music the emotional sense was projected directly to the individual, without the retardation incident to those arts where symbols for real objects have to be translated into an emotional counterpart. Both scholars seemed to have in mind a deep conviction that art is at its truest what Havelock Ellis later

called "the expression of the inexpressible." Pater especially was convinced that artistic expression was always trying to rid itself of references to the outside world of reality, in an effort to establish more firmly its hold on a world of inner reality.

All that we call "the new art" of to-day still struggling to emerge from its half-broken shell, is a substantiation of Pater's belief. Everywhere there is an effort to transcend mere reality, in painting, in music, in poetry, in the drama, and even—strange and paradoxical as it may sound—in the novel. There is come about a kind of common understanding that art is in nowise an imitation of reality, such as it comes upon us in the facts of everyday life. It is instead a penetration below the facts to a deeper reality, a more vivid consciousness of living than can be found anywhere on the surface of it.

It is strange to note how gradually this knowledge dawned upon the painters, who were first thrown on its trail by their very preoccupation with one of the chiefest facts of the painter's realism—the laws of light refraction. Impressionism was a new step toward realism, toward a clearer knowledge of the principles that govern the appearance of the actual world. Yet it was the Impressionists who became in time most desirous of using the symbols and forms of the world we watch only as the veriest background for their designs and harmonies of color. I have before me here as I write the lithograph of a painting by Gaston La Touche, a fountain at St. Cloud, that is a fountain only by courtesy, even as Whistler's bridges were abstract

forms rather than bridges. It is the very quality of abstraction here that makes for beauty. Unchained by literal transcription, the imagination can find a thousand beauties where the realist would give but one.

To-day, aside from the hundred groping minds bound in the new formula but unable to find a way, we have a painter such as Arthur B. Davies, greatly driven by the need of beauty and using the forms of the body so subtly that they are forgotten as mortal things and take on some aspect of that divinity which the finest art must always glimpse.

The painter has overcome the demand for "imitation of nature," even so the musician. Debussy is a transcription of the subconscious, of all that is evanescent and only dimly apprehended by the conscious mind. But Debussy is already outmoded by newer Frenchmen and newer Russians. At least there are disharmonies in Ravel and Stravinsky that bear no confessed resemblance to the forms of the world as we know them. The new composer realizes clearly the apostleship of music among the arts. He has thrown away reality and seeks at every point to rise above it as man's mind is above it, to create a cerebral response of cacophony and discordance, like old relationships breaking up into new, to the scene the actual world enforces on him.

It is in the drama where the problem is most difficult of resolution, where the principle seems doomed to fail. Realism has been for years a rallying cry among novelists, yet already Zola, claimed as the greatest realist of his brief time, now goes

down the corridor in his true colors of romanticist. In our own time such arch-realists in purpose as James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson, openly involve themselves in a dual purpose—to project the outer scene and the inner scene, each with fidelity and power. Both use prose as more than the symbol of conveyed intelligence; they use it to achieve, by changed rhythms, new and forgotten usages, and all the tricks of style, every effect which music thus achieves. To see Henry James in his later period in the same light is to strangely illuminate him. He wanted to make his words in describing life more than terms for intellectual understanding—they were to be raised to the *n*th power as imaginative factors as well.

The stage must find its cue there. Because modern life is bourgeois and realistic, the stage at its highest point will maintain its aspect of realism. But what is only vaguely understood among producers and dramatists is that the aspect of realism is to be only an aspect—that the substance must far transcend the appearance of modern life. Is it possible to say that Ibsen intuitively understood this when he scattered all through his imitations of common Scandinavian life symbols of the deepest human importance? At least I do not think that the stage of to-morrow will forsake realism—it will be a realism in the same mode perhaps as Hamlet played before curtains, a figure of man's life at its highest and gravest moments, walking like a shadow before a screen dark with shadows. The appearance of things merely is but a tantalizing mask for humanity. Everything that counts is behind it.